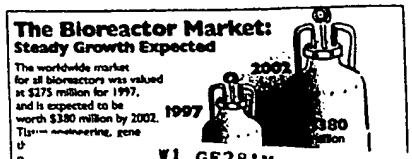

GENETIC ENGINEERING NEWS

GEN

BIOTECHNOLOGY • BIOPROCESS • BIORESEARCH • TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Contents

Pharmagene Raises More Capital for Research on Human Tissues

By Sophia Fox

Pharmagene, the Royston, U.K.-based biopharmaceutical company specialising in the use of human biomaterials for drug discovery research, has raised a further £5 million from a group of investors led by 3i and Abacus Nominees. The funding will enable the company to expand both its human biomaterials collection and its capabilities across a range of proprietary platform technologies.

Gordon Baxter, Ph.D., Pharmagene's cofounder and chief operating officer, claimed, "by the end of this year Pharmagene will have access to the largest collection of human RNAs and proteins anywhere in the world, and a range of innovative, yet robust technologies

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Perkin-Elmer Acquires PerSeptive to Expand Its Capabilities in Gene-Based Drug Discovery

By John Sterling

Perkin-Elmer's (PE; Norwalk, CT) decision last month to acquire PerSeptive Biosystems (Framingham, MA) via a $360 million stock swap was designed to strengthen PE in terms of broad capabilities in gene-based drug discovery. The company's main goal is to develop new products to improve the integration of genetic and protein research.

"This merger will enhance our position as an effective provider of innovative, integrated platforms enabling our customers to be more efficient and cost-effective in bringing new pharmaceuticals to market," says Tony L. White, PE's chairman, president and CEO. "The combination of our two companies should bolster our presence in the life sciences, [and it is our] belief that we must take bold action now to lead the emerging era of molecular medicine with leading positions in both genetic and protein analysis."

A driving force behind the merger is the vast amount of genetic information about human disease that is being accumulated by researchers and biotech companies working in the area of genomics. It is becoming increasingly obvious that these data need to be complemented with technologies for studying proteins and protein networks—a field known as proteomics (*see* GEN, *September 1, 1997, p.1*).

Perkin-Elmer acquired PerSeptive Biosystems for $360 million to obtain new technologies in mass spectrometry, biosepara-tions and purification for product development projects, spanning the range from genomics to proteomics.

PE officials, who claim that MALDI-TOF (Matrix Assisted

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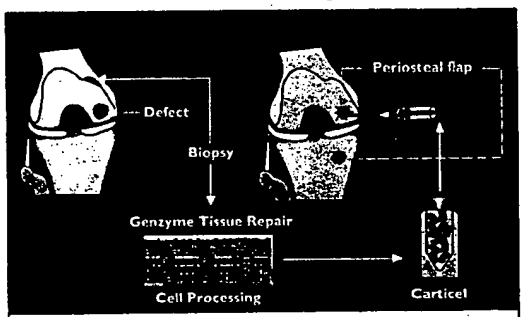
FDA OKs Genzyme's Carticel Product for Damage to Knees



Carticel, which was approved for the repair of clinically significant, symptomatic cartilaginous defects of the femoral condyle (medial, lateral or trochlear) caused by acute or repetitive trauma, employs a proprietary process to grow autologous cartilage cells for implantation.

By Naomi Pfeiffer

The FDA has approved a knee-cartilage replacement product made by Genzyme Tissue Repair (Cambridge, MA), a tracking-stock division of Genzyme Corp., for people with trauma-damaged knees.

Carticel™ (autologous cultured chondrocytes) is the first product to be licensed under the FDA's pro-

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Strategies for Target Validation Streamline Evaluation of Leads

By Vicki Glaser

Acacia Biosciences (Richmond, CA) last month announced its first agreement with a major pharmaceutical company, signing a deal with Eli Lilly (Indianapolis, IN) to use Acacia's Genome Reporter Matrix (GRM) to select and optimize some of Lilly's lead compounds. Acacia's yeast-based system for profiling drug activity is useful for evaluating the therapeutic potential of lead compounds, and it also has a role in the identification and validation of new drug targets.

"We're using the ecosystem of a cell to allow us to deduce the mechanism of action and target for any chemical," explains Bruce Cohen, president and CEO. "We screen for every target in a cell simultaneously...using transcription as a readout for how a cell is adapting to any perturbation," he says.

The GRM technology consists of two main databases: one is the genetic response profile, showing the effects of mutations in each individual yeast gene and compensatory gene regulatory mechanisms; the other is the chemical response profile, which documents changes in gene expression in response to chemical compounds. Computational analysis and pattern matching between the genetic and chemical profiles yields information on the specificity, potency and side-effects risk of a drug lead.

Targeting Targets

No longer is mapping and sequencing a gene—or the human genome—an end unto itself, but

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Sticky Ends

Avigen received two grants from the NIH & University of California for research on gene therapy for treatment of cancer & HIV infections...MRL Pharmaceutical Services, of Reston, VA, launched the TSN Bug Finder, which is able to locate & retrieve client-specified microorganisms in real-time...Gensia Sicor, Inc. will move its corporate staff from San Diego to Irvine, CA, by end of year... FDA accepted NDA from Sepracor for levalbuterol HCl inhalation solution...An $11.7M mezzanine financing has been closed by Activated Cell Therapy, which changed its name to Dendreon Corporation...Astra AB will build major research facility in Waltham, MA, and is also relocating Astra Arcus research facility from Rochester to Boston area...Prolifix Ltd. team used a small peptide to inhibit the E2F protein complex and induced apoptosis in mammalian tumor cells...Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Inc. and Alpha Therapeutic Corp. ended an agreement to develop VX-366 for treatment of inherited hemoglobin disorders...NaviCyte received Phase 1 SBIR grant for up to $100,000 from NIH for development of prototype of its NaviFlow technology for high-throughput screening ...Covance Inc. will invest $21 million in expansion and renovation of its facility in Indianapolis, IN.

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Target

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merely a means to an end. The critical next step is to validate the gene and its protein product as a potential drug target. The Human Genome Project continues to produce a treasure chest of expressed sequence tags (ESTs) and a tantalizing array of complete gene sequences.

Companies are applying a variety of functional genomic strategies to link genes to specific diseases and to multigenic phenotypes. Yet the ultimate challenge for pharmaceutical companies is to sift through all the sequence and differential gene expression data to identify the best targets for drug discovery.

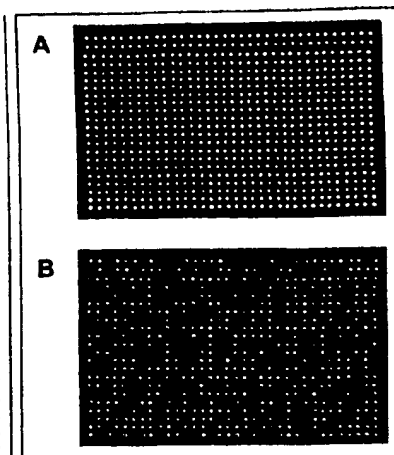
Spinning off technology developed at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), **Cytogen Corp.** (Princeton, NJ) formed its wholly owned subsidiary **AxCell Biosciences** earlier this year. The young company is building a protein interaction database, cataloging all the interactions the modular domains of proteins can engage in with a range of ligands, in order to gain insight into protein function and to select the most critical interaction to target for drug development.

AxCell's cloning-of-ligand-targets (COLT) technology employs "recognition units" from the company's genetic diversity library (GDL) to map functional protein interactions and quantitate their affinity. The company's inter-functional protcomic database (IFP-dbase) elucidates protein interaction networks and structure-activity relationships based on ligand affinity with protein modular domains.

Defining Disease Pathways

Signal Pharmaceuticals, Inc.'s (San Diego, CA) integrated drug target and discovery effort is based on mapping gene-regulating pathways in cells and identifying small molecules that regulate the activation of those genes. In collaboration with academic researchers, the company has identified a large number of regulatory proteins in several mitogen-activated protein (MAP) kinase pathways (including the JNK, FRK and p38 signaling pathways), which Signal is evaluating for the treatment of autoimmune, inflammatory, cardiovascular and neurologic diseases, and cancer. Other target identification programs focus on the NF-kB pathway, estrogen-related genes and central/peripheral nervous system genes.

Regulating cytokine production in immune and inflammatory disorders, and modifying bone metabolism to treat osteoporosis are the focus of Signal's collaboration with **Tanabe Seiyaku** (Osaka, Japan). Signal has partnered with **Organon/Akzo Nobel** (Netherlands) to identify estrogen-responsive genes as targets for treating neurodegenerative and psychiatric diseases, atherosclerosis and ischemia, and with **Roche Bioscience** (Palo Alto, CA) to develop human peripheral nerve cell lines for the discovery of treatments for pain and incontinence.



The Genome Reporter Matrix depicts a subset of a yeast array. Each colony harbors a GFP-reporter construct for a single gene. Collectively, the array reports the expression of all yeast genes. A: Array in visible light. B: Image of fluorescent emission from the array.

Acacia Biosciences

Exelixis' (S. San Francisco, CA) strategy for target selection is to define disease pathways and identify regulatory molecules that activate or inhibit those biochemical/genetic pathways. Based on the finding that these pathways are conserved across species, the company is studying the model genetic systems of Drosophila and *Caenorhabditis elegans*. Using its PathFinder technology, Exelixis systematically introduces mutations into the genomes of these model organisms, looking for mutations that enhance or suppress the target disease-related gene. These novel genes then become the basis of drug screening assays.

Cadus Pharmaceutical Corp. (Tarrytown, NY) is identifying surrogate ligands to newly discovered orphan G-protein coupled transmembrane receptors of unknown function to determine the suitability of the receptors as drug targets. Inserting the novel receptor in a yeast system yields a ligand that activates the receptor. Access to a surrogate ligand allows the company to screen for receptor antagonists in the yeast system.

"The antagonist plus the surrogate ligand gives you two probes—an on probe and an off probe—which allows you to look at function," explains David Webb, Ph.D., vp of research and chief scientific officer. A surrogate ligand also provides information on which G-protein interacts with the orphan receptor and its associated signaling pathways, further clarifying the role of the receptor as a potential drug target. Cadus' collaboration with **SmithKline** (Philadelphia) capitalizes on Cadus' ability to determine orphan receptor function, applying the technology to SmithKline's proprietary, newly discovered G-protein receptors.

Cadus' recombinant yeast system can also be used to screen cell and tissue extracts for natural ligands, and the company is accelerating its internal drug-discovery efforts in the areas of cancer, inflammation and allergy. A recent equity investment in **Axiom Biotechnologies** (San Diego, CA) gave Cadus a license to Axiom's high-throughput pharmacologic screening system for lead optimization and discovery.

As its name implies, **gene/Networks** (Alameda, CA) focuses on identifying gene networks that contribute to multigenic phenotypes and complex disease processes. The integration of mouse and human genetic studies forms the basis of the technology. The Genome Tagged Mice database in development will serve as a library of natural mouse genetic and phenotypic variation. Disease-related genes identified in mice are then evaluated in human family- and population-based studies to confirm their clinical relevance and linkages to pathophysiologic traits.

Blocking Gene Expression

Inactivating a gene known to be expressed in association with a particular disease is one approach to identifying appropriate therapeutic targets. The target validation and discovery program at **Ribozyme Pharmaceuticals, Inc.** (Boulder, CO) applies the company's ribozyme technology to achieve selective inhibition of gene expression in cell culture and in animals.

Correlation of the gene expression inhibition with phenotype can

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Target

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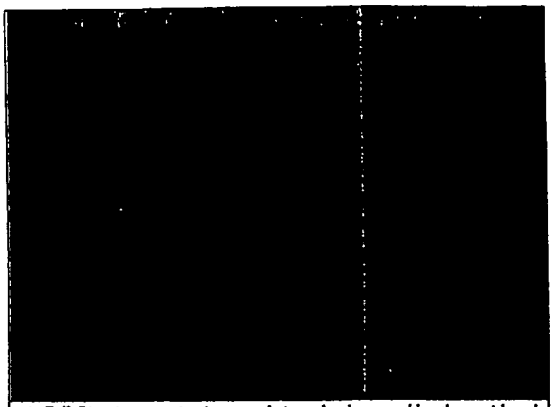
suggest the relative importance of the gene in disease pathology. The company's nuclease-resistant ribozymes form the basis of a collaboration with **Schering AG** (Germany) for drug target validation and the development of ribozyme-based therapeutic agents, and with **Chiron Corp.** (Emeryville, CA) for target validation.

With several antisense compounds now progressing through clinical trials, the concept of using oligonucleotides to inhibit gene activity is not new. But rather than focusing on therapeutics development, **Sequitur, Inc.** (Natick, MA) is creating antisense compounds for the purpose of determining gene function and validating drug targets. Clients typically provide the one-year-old company with the sequence (or EST) of a potential gene target and, in return, Sequitur custom designs a series of three to six antisense compounds that yield a three-to-ten-fold inhibition of the target gene in cell culture. The company also provides oligofectins, a series of cationic lipids, to deliver the oligonucleotides to a variety of cultured cells.

"Differential expression information is just for correlation, it doesn't tell function or confirm what would be a good target," says Tod Woolf, Ph.D., director of technology development at Sequitur. Whereas, antisense compounds will inhibit a target. Sequitur offers both phosphorothioate DNA antisense compounds, and its proprietary Next Generation chimeric oligonucleotides, which have a higher hybridization affinity, greater specificity and reduced toxicity, according to the company.



AxCell Biosciences scientists say their technology enables the rapid and simple functional identification of the two essential molecular components of protein interaction networks: specific recognition units that bind distinct modular protein domains are identified and isolated using a combination structural/functional approach that uses both peptide phase display Genetic Diversity Libraries (GDL) and bioinformatics, and cloning of Ligand Targets (COLT) technology utilizes recognition units as functional probes to isolate families of interactor proteins.

Mining Pathogen Genomes

Companies such as **Human Genome Sciences** (HGS; Rockville, MD), **Incyte** (Palo Alto, CA), **Millennium Pharmaceuticals Inc.** (Cambridge, MA) and **Genome Therapeutics** (Waltham, MA) are relying on high-speed DNA sequencing, positional cloning and other strategies to identify specific microbial genomic sites that would be good targets for infectious disease therapeutics.

HGS recently completed sequencing of the bacterial pathogen *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, which is the focus of an agreement with **Hoffmann-La Roche** (Basel, Switzerland). Roche will use the sequence data to develop new anti-infectives against *S. pneumoniae*. HGS and Roche have expanded their collaboration to include a nonexclusive license to access sequence information for the intestinal bacterium *Enterococcus faecalis*.

Incyte Pharmaceuticals has completed one-fold coverage of the *Candida albicans* genome, identifying 60% of the genes of this fungal pathogen. This genome will become part of the company's PathoSeq microbial database. Incyte recently introduced the ZooSeq animal gene sequence and expression database. The database will provide genomic information across various species commonly used in preclinical drug testing, which may help to better define potential drug targets.

Millennium Pharmaceuticals continues to report success in identifying novel drug targets, having recently discovered a novel chemokine called neurotactin and a new class of MAD-related proteins that inhibit transforming growth factor beta (TGF-ß) signaling. The company also received U.S. patent coverage for the tub genes, believed to play a role in obesity, and for the gene that encodes the protein melastatin, which appears to suppress metastasis in malignant melanoma. ■

Pangea

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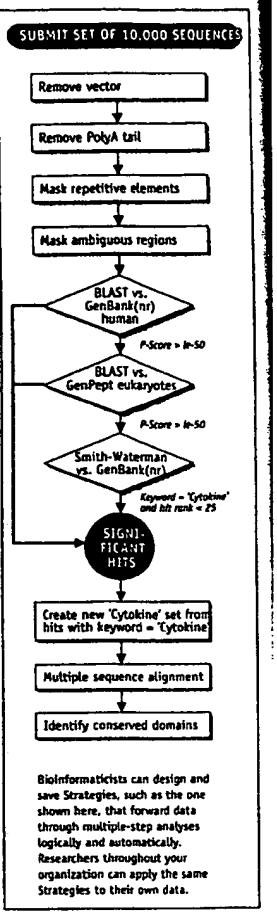
Smith, now a computer programmer, is an expert in systems integration, Internet technologies and the application of industrial engineering principles to the drug discovery process. Before co-founding Pangea, he was the manager of software development at Attorney's Briefcase, a legal research software company.

By being "in the trenches" with customers and collaborators, Bellenson and Smith sensed the frustration of pharmaceutical researchers whose incompatible tools have impeded their progress. According to Bellenson, "Most of them are geared toward analyzing one molecule at a time. It's like emptying the ocean with an eye dropper—an incompatible eye dropper at that. A pharmaceutical company may have 30 different drug discovery teams with various approaches. The problem is to manage the process of experimenting with a lot of different approaches, to automate while maintaining flexibility."

GeneWorld 2.1 enables "integration of the entire target discovery and validation process," Bellenson says. The commercial software package coordinates the entire process of sequence-data analysis and can be integrated with other programs and databases, according to Smith, who adds that it handles thousands of sequence results, organizes and automates annotation and seamlessly interacts with growing genome databases. Simple forms and menus enable users to turn raw sequence data into crucial knowledge for drug discovery by applying algorithms to sequences, creating custom analysis strategies and producing useful reports, without the need for writing computer code. GeneWorld 2.1 runs on a variety of platforms and operating systems.

Pairing industrial relational database-management systems with a web-browser interface, Pangea's Operating System of Drug Discovery™ is an open-computing framework that allows client/server and Java-enabled web-based technologies to collect, organize and analyze drug discovery information for pharmaceutical companies to simplify and accelerate drug discovery. The technology unites automated genomics database analysis for drug target site selection, chemical information database analysis and large-scale combinatorial chemistry project management and high-throughput screening project management for drug lead efficacy analysis. Pangea officials maintain that these integrated elements provide a unified environment for chemists, biologists and others involved in the drug discovery process to work together with commercial and public domain software.



Bioinformaticists can design and save Strategies, such as the one shown here, that forward data through multiple-step analyses logically and automatically. Researchers throughout your organization can apply the same Strategies to their own data.

Pangea's Operating System of Drug Discovery can accommodate Sybase, Oracle or Informix relational database-management systems and any version of UNIX. It absorbs new data formats, databases, algorithms and analysis paradigms into the automated workflow without software modifications. Netscape Navigator™ provides a friendly user interface from PC, Macintosh, and UNIX workstations.

In the near term, Pangea plans to complete its bioinformatics core with two more programs. Gene Foundry, a sample tracking and workflow sequence package for DNA sequence and fragment information, will also offer interaction with robots, reagent tracking and troubleshooting. Gene Thesaurus, the other package is a "warehouse of bioinformatics data," says Bellenson. ■

Europe

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GTAC Chairman, Professor Norman C. Nevin, said 1996 saw "four important developments": an increase in enquiries and submissions made to GTAC; an increase in the complexity of submitted protocols; a continuing shift from gene therapy for single-gene disorders toward strategies aimed at tumour destruction in cancer; and a growth in international sponsorship of U.K. gene therapy trials.

Since 1993, GTAC and its predecessor, the Clothier Committee, have approved 18 U.K. gene therapy clinical trials (13 of which have been carried out), which are listed in the report. The disease areas targeted by these trials include severe combined immunodeficiency (1 trial), cystic fibrosis (6), metastatic melanoma (2), lymphoma (2), neuroblastoma (1), breast cancer (1), Hurler's syndrome (1), cervical cancer (1), glioblastoma breast cancer, breast cancer with liver metastases, glioblastoma, malignant ascites due to gastrointestinal cancer and ovarian cancer.

Copies of the GTAC third annual report are available from the GTAC Secretariat, Wellington House, 133-155 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8UG, U.K.

Coated Lenses Prevent PCO

Scientists in the U.K. say it may be possible to prevent posterior capsule opacification (PCO), a common complication following cataract surgery, by using the implanted polymethylmethacrylate (PMMA) intraocular lens as a drug delivery system. PCO occurs in 30-50% of cataract surgery patients as a result of stimulated cell growth within the remaining capsular bag. The condition causes a decline in visual acuity and requires expensive laser treatment, thus negating the routine use of cataract surgery in underdeveloped countries, explains G. Duncan, at the